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THE POETRY OF THOMAS HARDY

BY ALFRED NOYES

THOSE who have read the novels of Thomas Hardy might—especially such novels as *The Return of the Native*—have always known that he was a great poet, without regard to the medium in which the gods or the “Immanent Will” might lead him to work. Those who have had the privilege of hearing him speak of his aims know that poetry, moving properly in meter (just as the Universe with its tides and stars and human pulses moves in meter), lies nearest to his heart. And those who are really abreast of the achievements in poetry during the last fifty years are also aware that Mr. Hardy’s poem, “The Darkling Thrush,” is a lyric of rugged strength, that peculiar strength which comes from understatement and the sense of something in reserve; a lyric of such pathos and beauty as can be compared with the best that has ever been done in our great lyrical language; and that is to say one of the finest lyrics in the world. From the first lines, “I leant upon a coppice gate when Frost was specter gray,” and the suggestive imagery where-with the lovely landscape, with its tangled vine stems scoring the sky “like strings from broken lyres,” to the restrained and intense rapture of the close, the poem bears upon it the stamp of a truth and sincerity beyond praise.

“The land’s sharp features seemed to be
The Century’s corpse outleant,
His crypt the cloudy canopy,
The wind his death-lament.
The ancient pulse of germ and birth
Was shrunken hard and dry,
And every spirit upon earth
Seemed fervourless as I.

“At once a voice rang forth among
The bleak twigs overhead
In a full-hearted even-song
Of joy illimited;

An aged thrush, frail, gaunt, and small,
In blast-beruffled plume,
Had chosen thus to fling his soul
Upon the growing gloom.

“So little cause for carolings
Of such ecstatic sound
Was written on terrestrial things
Afar or nigh around,
That I could think there trembled through
His happy good-night air
Some blessed hope whereof he knew
And I was unaware.”

The quaint human touch—so characteristic of this poet—whereby “winter’s dregs made desolate the weakening eye of day” leads on with cumulative effect to the broader symbolism of the first stanza quoted above, in which the landscape represents the vast intellectual and spiritual period that closed with the nineteenth century. But there is none of that overemphasis of the twofold significance with which too many modern poets are apt to falsify both the symbol and the thing symbolized. There is just that touch—and no more—which gives the poem solidity and depth; and when it reaches the ecstatic climax of the song of the thrush justifies the ecstasy with thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls. By sinking the century into the landscape the poet is enabled to bring a fleeting glimpse of heaven before us in the song of the bird, and the whole poem is flooded with “the light that never was on sea or land.” It is a lyric that, read once, may be forgotten. Read three times, it will haunt the reader’s memory as long as pain and death retain any meaning for him. For those, too, who had come to regard the mind of Thomas Hardy as something like the wintry landscape of his poem the sudden rapturous song of the “aged thrush, frail, gaunt, and small, in blast-beruffled plume,” must seem almost to symbolize the divinest quality of that mind, the quality which came to many as a similarly sudden surprise when our profoundest pessimist betook himself to poetry pure and simple. In that unexpected note which trembles also with some strange hope through the “Chorus of the Pities” at the end of *The Dynasts*, that epic of gloom and blood and world anguish, is there not something far nearer to the fount of tears than any poet less sincere could give us? We are used to so much poetic tinsel nowadays that one

may clutch with something like passion at the hem of the gray garment of Hope which Mr. Hardy displays passing through that final dream of his titanic drama.

When the first two parts of *The Dynasts* appeared there was a general disposition among critics to "hum" and "ha." "The furtive yelp of the masked and writhing poeticule"—as another Victorian poet exuberantly described it—did not fail, however, to testify to the real greatness of the strange intruder. The method of these critics was the usual one—an ancient method and a very rampant one in the eighteenth century, as the protests of Coleridge testify—namely, that of quoting a few detached lines like,

"That dignified and pensive gentleman,"

and plaintively inquiring if this were poetry, and if Mr. Hardy had not better return to his novels; for Mr. X and Mr. Y could both of them show him several tricks of improving verse so blank. These critics—and they are always with us—had not only forgotten their Shakespeare and his methods; they had also—and in this case it is more important—forgotten their Goethe; and they were displaying complete ignorance of the first principles of criticism. It may not be out of place here to comment on this matter, for it is one of the most widely misunderstood points in connection with the right appreciation of poetry.

It is difficult to fathom the stupidity which can assume that a writer like Hardy in a line like,

"That dignified and pensive gentleman,"

is really aiming at the beauty of the "Ode on a Grecian Urn." Over and over again Hardy has proved his sense of beauty. But even if he had not, he is—beyond all dispute—one of the foremost men of letters of our time. Yet critic after critic could calmly assume that the line quoted above was the result of a deliberate effort by this brilliant man of letters to write a single line of independent metrical beauty such as,

"In cradle of the rude imperious surge."

There is surely not an educated man in the world who could not better the attempt if that were really so, for in every detail the line looks like a deliberate attempt to write as ludicrously prosaic a verse as FitzGerald's,

"A Mr. Williamson, a clergyman."

There is not an educated foreigner who, with only a smattering of English and the help of a dictionary, could not better it. And yet such an assumption is, over and over again, the fundamental assumption of a certain kind of English criticism. It is as if an amateur chess-player playing with Paul Morphy were to assume that his opponent's first unusual move was a disastrous mistake, and without examination of the general scheme of the game were thereupon to announce "mate" in three moves. Self-stultification could not be more complete. Yet Shakespeare—and Hamlet in his remarks to Polonius would surely give this method of criticism some food for thought—is almost the only great poet who has escaped this folly, and even he has not escaped scatheless. It is not only the obscure critic who resorts to it, but it is even the critic of eminence—as Christopher North with his "This will never do" to Wordsworth's magnificent "Cathedral of Song"; and it manifests itself in the realms of all the other arts. Whistler, without reference to his aims, was assumed to be failing to attain what any boy with his first paint-box might attain with ease.

The publication of the third part of *The Dynasts*, however, brought the amateur chess-players of criticism to a graver frame of mind with regard to the soundness of their own position, and the work has begun to take its place as one of the greatest poems of modern times. It has, though on a much larger scale, all the great qualities of Mr. Hardy's novels—their structural perfection, as of organic architecture, their scientific precision and lucidity, their biting irony, their symbolism, and their extraordinary power of conveying a vast sense of movement, whether of heather on a lonely wind-swept moor, of armies, or of the starry heavens. Any one reading it rightly will secure a vast panoramic view of the whole period of the Napoleonic wars, with all the ramifications of its politics, the private intrigues of its statesmen, the public debates, the fashionable assemblies, and the life of people in country districts where the tidal world movements broke only in ripples. Never before in literature has so vast a field been presented so simply and completely and originally. For the work is so marvelously perfect in structure, the parts are all so finely related to the whole, that one seems to survey the whole simultaneously. But the work must be read consecutively or the wonder of it will elude the reader.

For instance, if one reads, at the end of the first Act of Part III, the following dialogue between Napoleon (who has just returned from his Moscow disaster) and Marie Louise one may think the verse very blank indeed:

Napoleon:

“I intend,
Also to gild the dome of the Invalides
In best gold leaf, and on a novel pattern.”

Marie Louise:

“To gild the dome, dear? Why?”

Napoleon:

“To give them things
To think about. . . . So they'll forget
The woes of Moscow.”

And when the scene is closed by the announcement of supper the desultory reader may suffer disappointment. Yet if any properly qualified reader takes the whole Act as it stands, he will begin to think it only possible to a poet who combines in himself the peculiar powers of a Dante, a Goethe, and a Voltaire—with, perhaps, a dash of Gibbon—but with all these powers in perfect unity and harmony. For the scene just quoted follows immediately on another, of merciless winter in Lithuania, where Napoleon's soldiers are told that their leader has deserted them.

“It is growing dark, though nothing distinguishes where the sun sets. There is no sound except that of a shuffling of feet in the direction of a bivouac. Here are gathered tattered men like skeletons. Their noses and ears are frost-bitten, and pus is oozing from their eyes. These stricken shades, in a limbo of gloom, are among the last survivors of the French army. . . . One squad, plowing through snow above their knees and with icicles dangling from their hair that clink like glass lustres as they walk, . . . bring back boughs and contrive to light a fire. With swords they cut rashers from a dead horse, using gunpowder for salt to eat them with. Two others return with a dead rat and some candle-ends. . . .

A straggler enters.

First Soldier (dazed):

“What—gone, do you say? Gone?”

A scene of despairing madness follows till they are exhausted, and once more crouch hopelessly around the fire.

In the morning the Russians arrive and find them still sitting there.

Kutuzof:

"Go, stir them up. We slay not sleeping men."

Russian Officer:

"Prince, here's a curious picture. They are dead."

Kutuzof (with indifference):

"Oh, naturally. After the snow was down
I marked a sharpening of the air last night.
We shall be stumbling on such frost-baked meats
Most of the way to Wilna."

Officer (examining the bodies):

"They all sit
As they were living still, but stiff as horns;
And even the color has not left their cheeks,
Whereon the tears remain in strings of ice.
It was a marvel they were not consumed:
Their clothes are cindered by the fire in front,
While at their back the frost has caked them hard."

(Exeunt Kutuzof, his staff, and the detachment of horse in the direction of Wilna; and with the advance of day the snow resumes its fall, slowly burying the dead bivouackers.)

That scene surely throws a new light on Napoleon's supper, and transfuses the frivolous verses of his conversation with a vitriolic irony. The passage of verse italicised above is in its burning depth of bitterness only to be compared with certain passages of Dante's "*Inferno*." The verse of Hardy is not to be estimated by "quirks and turns" within the line. It is altogether a larger matter. "Prince, here's a curious picture," taken by itself might not rise to the standard of a minor critic. Taken as the utterances of the characters in "*Hamlet*" are taken, as notes in a great symphony that can only be fully realized in the organic whole, they grip the heart and intellect with their grim conviction.

From beginning to end the poetry of Thomas Hardy is the very voice of pessimism, but it is the pessimism of Shakespeare's tragedies, a pessimism so profound that it goes down to the depths where construction begins. The motto of it might be, "Life's a poor player!" With the Book of Ecclesiastes it would cry, "All is vanity!" and with Job it would sometimes be tempted to curse the Omnipotent Dramatist and die; but what it really does is to find the connections, links, harmonies, ironic harmonies, per-

haps, but still harmonies, between one detail of the world and another. For that is the whole business of art. It finds meanings, bitter meanings apparently and primarily, but still meanings, in the meaningless. It finds in the chaotic a little order, rhythm, and music; and this, so far as it goes, is—as the very name of poetry implies—not destructive, but constructive. Let the pessimist give us the stage and the poor players — *Time's Laughing-Stocks* — and the soul of man will flash to the Dramatist. To put the matter in its simplest form, we must have All or Nothing for an answer when we ask what lies behind the scenes of the Universe. The poetry of Thomas Hardy does not give us “Nothing” as the answer. Let us have two phrases, as in merely the title of his book, *Time's Laughing-Stocks*, phrases whose connection is based on an artistic, even if ironic, harmony; and we have all the basis for a constructive philosophy that the wildest optimist can desire. For there is then no limit to their logical consequences, no limit to the modulations of the intellectual music we can build upon them, in every direction, outward, downward, and upward. They are, necessarily, logically, fragments of an infinite symphony ranging from hell to heaven. They are organic. The Spirit of Life is in them with its infinite possibilities; and where that Spirit possesses a work of art the work, however small, is like the five loaves and two small fishes of the miracle. A multitude may be fed by it, and we may fill many baskets with the fragments that are left over. Destructive poetry is a contradiction in terms. The tragedies of Shakespeare are not gospels of annihilation emitted in a fundamentally meaningless harmony from the baseless brain of an Accident from Nowhere. The content and import of a work of art are not to be weighed in the same way as those of a philosophic system or a work of science. The cry of Macbeth, “Out! out! brief candle!” is not to be taken as a cold scientific statement of the meaninglessness of human life. Our fathers understood this when they set the Book of Ecclesiastes before their passionate Gospel. When Shakespeare wrote, “Life's a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage,” the words contained more than a negation. They have passion, pain, and, most important of all, they have profound inner harmonies. Tragedy is not merely negation. It is a sloughing off of the Temporal for the Eternal. What infinities of respiration are involved in those two

words—"his hour"! There is a positive, a constructive, element in such poetry which goes to swell the cry of Calvary, "Why hast Thou forsaken Me?"

There is no sublimity in the death of an insubstantial toad under an accidental and nonsensical harrow which arose from Nowhere out of Nothing. But there is sublimity in the dying cry of Hamlet to the friend who would fain have followed him, "Absent thee from felicity awhile"—a cry which, in its implied idea of sacrifice, contains almost the whole fundamental dogma of Christianity. Well might that friend of Hamlet be caught up by the surrounding orchestra of the universe at that moment, and continue the great symphonic movement with his own faltering voice over the dead body: "Good-night, sweet Prince! And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest."

In the poetry of Thomas Hardy, as in the grave-diggers' scene in "Hamlet," we are shown the skull beneath the face of beauty and reminded of it with remorseless power. But the same may be said of the Hebrew prophets. If Hardy sees men as insects crawling over their little ball of dust, he is only able to do this because, as a poet, he himself can soar high enough. It is the soul of one of these same men that embraces so vast a field. It is the soul of one of these same men which knocks thus at the doors of Eternity.

We have spoken above of the way in which he takes two or three details, disconnected to the merely philosophic or, at any rate, to the merely scientific eye, and establishes an artistic harmony, a connection, even if ironic, between them. A good example of this is the remarkable poem entitled "The Two Rosalinds." It is the story of a man who enters a theater where—forty years ago—he had seen a beautiful Rosalind. He enters, wishing to see the old vision, but the new Rosalind disappoints him. As he comes out he is confronted by a miserable old hag hawking the words of the play: "So you don't like her, sir?" said she. "Ah, I was once that Rosalind! Now, some forty years ago I used to say, 'Come, woo me, woo me!'" and she struck the attitude:

"Clear as noon

My Rosalind was here. . . . Thereon the band withinside lightly
Beat up a merry tune."

Now the connection between that merry tune and the ghastly discovery, together with all the other little ironic harmonies that are so deliberately drawn out of the situa-

tion, refuses to give up its secret to science. But it is obvious that it is full of the deepest significance to the poet, a significance that would only be fully rendered by a symphony that should sum up the whole universe. It is only the resultant voice of the whole that can give us the whole truth. So that even here we may think that there trembles, through all that bitterness, some "blessed hope" whereof we are unaware. For great art does not need to be "aware" of these things any more than it needs a definite "moral" to its stories. The poetry of Thomas Hardy is meat for the strong; but so is the Book of Ecclesiastes, and the "pessimism" of both is so profound that it postulates without affirming a passionate gospel. For there is one reality that they leave us—the grim reality of infinite passion, infinite pain; and infinite compassion, too. The starving thrush of *Time's Laughing-Stocks* demands, like the caged red-breast of Blake, an enraged heaven. This poet strikes notes—pessimist though he may even think himself to be—which demand only one answer from the symphonic whole—"not one of these shall fall to the ground without your Father." Negation may be swept aside at once. The superficial pessimist is necessarily wrong, for he says that last word which no man can say or can ever say. Amid all our talk of "progress," mankind cannot, without self-stultification, acquiesce in a theory of a universe based on Nothing and ending in Nothing, or even in one which involves—at any stage, no matter how distant in time—the proceeding of the greater from the less, of the conscious and loving from the less than conscious. Logically, Hardy realizes this, and speaks here and there of a Something that is more than "conscious" and above "love"; but the human imagination is bound by its own limits, and in refusing to allow its own highest attributes to the Power behind the Universe it necessarily runs the risk of allowing merely mechanical attributes. This is the one flaw in the philosophical system of Thomas Hardy considered apart from its artistic import. In refusing to lessen the Highest by a lofty yet humble anthropomorphism he too often seems to set The Eternal lower than the brutes by reason of its mechanical aloofness; and lower the things mechanical by reason of its brutality. But this flaw is merely in his philosophical armor. It does not affect the artistic values of his work of which he himself may philosophically be "un-

aware." He is to be thanked for bringing our optimism face to face with those grim realities which the religion of the future (and if mankind be in earnest about itself some religion it needs now more than ever, and needs passionately) will once more have to embrace. "In poetry," said Matthew Arnold, "our race will come to find an ever surer and surer stay," for the inevitable answer of poetry to the question of All or Nothing is—All.

Great art establishes for us the hidden harmonies of the universe and reveals our membership of the whole divine body, linking details which science cannot ever get into the same field of vision, linking the shriveled moth with the wheeling stars and the passion of the Godhead. There is no gap in the scheme of things for the great artist in his infinite field any more than for the scientist in his finite field. The poet cannot pluck a flower "without troubling of a star." There is no severance, nothing but unity. If the Omnipotent Creator dies into immortal life with the meanest of His dying creatures a fuller light is thrown upon the poem of "The Darkling Thrush," a more triumphant passion throbs with a deeper significance in the throat of Blake's caged bird. Without it, what a futile mockery it is—to be "unaware" of something that is non-existent! But that fuller light of vision is not a different or contradictory light. It is only for these poems the logical completion of their own music, which demanded that fulfilment, led up to it, step by step, with mathematical precision, and can set no limit to its progress and its hope, and can never say "the last word." But to arrive at that climbing and building music, to arrive at the first postulate on which that music is based, we have to clear away the cant and falsehood and all the colored lights of illusion which perplex the modern artist. We have to avoid mistaking fen-fires for the stars. This poet of pessimism makes short work of illusions, and, as we have said, goes to the depths where construction—unless the impossible last word has been said—begins.

ALFRED NOYES.